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Pilot's secret mission ends five decades later: Daughter, sister bring home remains of pilot killed in 1952

By Greg Bolt
The Register-Guard

CRESWELL - It was a meeting 52 years coming and a reunion as joyous as it was bittersweet.

Born three weeks after her father died in 1952 while piloting a clandestine CIA mission in China, Roberta Lee Cox didn't know how she would react. But when she and her aunt at last were ushered to a table containing the only remains of Robert Charles "Bob" Snoddy - two teeth and a few inches of arm bone - Cox was overcome.

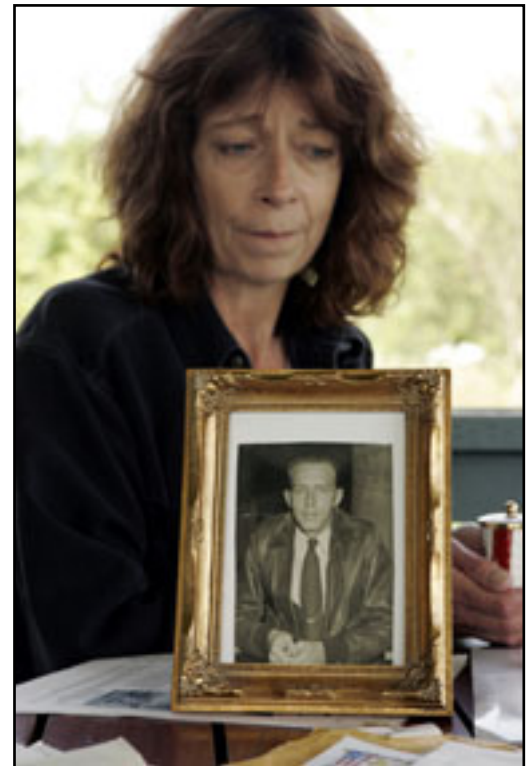
"It started in my toes, and then I lost it - briefly," she said Wednesday, tears again welling in her eyes as she sat amid some of her father's pictures on her aunt's back porch in Creswell. "That's the first time I've ever been in the same room with my dad."

Cox is Snoddy's only child, and her aunt, Ruth Boss, is his only sibling. Together they waited a lifetime for that moment last weekend at an Air Force base in Hawaii when, finally, they would bring a hero home.

The journey ends Friday at a Eugene cemetery, where Bob Snoddy will be laid to rest in his mother's grave. He will have the honor guard and flag he earned as a wartime pilot for the Navy, and a bugler will play taps.

"I'm going to lose it when taps goes," said Boss, a lively 81-year-old who gives every impression that "losing it" is not something that happens very often. "That to me is the final deal. There's nothing past that."

But getting to that moment has not been easy. It began amid Cold War intrigue complete with spies and a double agent, turned into years of diplomatic maneuvering and finally ended with a long-shot, high-



Roberta Lee Cox was born three weeks after her father, Robert Snoddy, died when his C-47 Skytrain was shot down on a CIA mission over China in 1952.

tech recovery mission to China.

Snoddy and his sister grew up in Roseburg, where the only thing the older brother loved more than fishing the Umpqua River was airplanes. His rubber band-powered balsa-wood fliers went farther than anyone else's, and he told anyone who would listen that someday he would be a pilot.

"When he was in high school, he was nuts about planes," Boss said. "He'd say, 'Someday, I'm going to be up there.' "

He joined the Navy midway through his education at Oregon State University and flew in World War II. A few years after that, his itch for adventure and service led him to a company called Civil Air Transport that was flying food and medical supplies into war-torn China and East Asia.

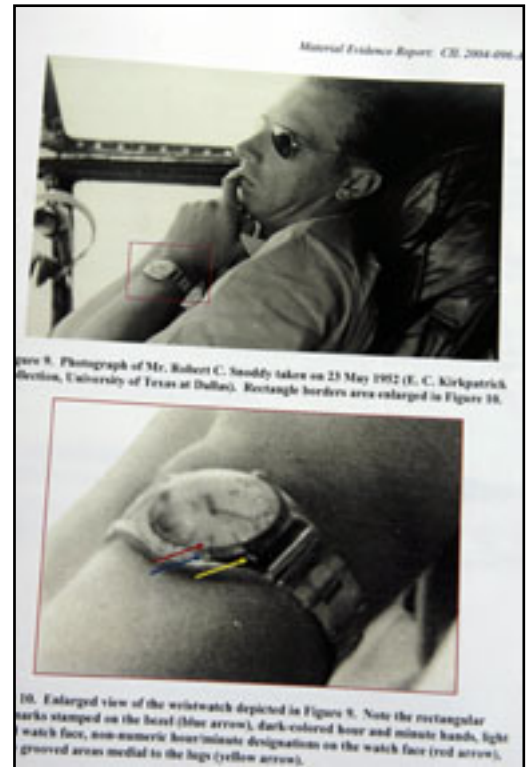
What he didn't know at first was that not long after he took the job, the company was bought by the CIA. Its staff was sworn to secrecy, and Snoddy began flying covert missions in support of American-funded elements battling the communist Chinese.

On the night of Nov. 29, 1952, he and co-pilot Norman Schwartz were ferrying a pair of CIA agents into what was then Manchuria to pick up an anti-communist spy. But the man apparently had turned double agent and alerted Chinese forces; as Snoddy swooped low over the pickup site in his C-47 Skytrain, they opened fire. The plane burst into flame.

The fire and crash killed Snoddy and Schwartz, but the two CIA men survived and were captured. It would be more than 20 years before the pilots' families would know what really happened.

They were told that Snoddy had crashed in the Sea of Japan after hitting a flock of birds on a routine flight, a necessary subterfuge to protect agents still working against Chinese communists. It wasn't until President Nixon opened relations with China - and the United States admitted that the captured men were CIA spies - that the prisoners were released.

That was 1973. Over the next 30 years, Roberta Cox finally got to know her father.



A page from a government forensic report shows photographs of the Rolex watch that Robert Snoddy wore when he flew covert missions for the Central Intelligence Agency. Snoddy's watch was one of the pieces of evidence found in China that helped the government identify his remains.

Top photo: **Paul Carter** / The Register-Guard

The only picture of Roberta and her parents is a shot taken of Snoddy and his very pregnant wife, Charlotte, his high school sweetheart. He had drawn an arrow on it pointing to Charlotte's tummy and wrote next to it "Gizmo," the nickname he had given her.

The couple was living in Japan, and Charlotte was all alone when word came of the crash. She died some 20 years later before hearing the whole story of her husband's fate.

As Cox grew up, she learned little about her father because her mother was so devastated by his death that she couldn't bring herself to talk about him. She learned more from Boss and her grandparents as she grew older, and she was 20 when the government revealed the true story of his mission.

But it wasn't until the late 1980s that Cox, who now is a schoolteacher in San Jose, Calif., really began to understand what kind of a man her father was. That's when she started to hear from some of the people Snoddy had worked with in CAT, who told her of a dashing and brave pilot with a big heart and a devotion to country and duty.

"When I began to hear stories from people who flew with him, he began to become more real to me," she said.

"You knew he was a patriotic soldier and a very brave individual who gave his life for his country."

But the real news came only last year, when it was announced that a team from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command in Hawaii would be allowed into China's Jilin province to search for the two pilots' remains. Tipped by elderly villagers who remembered the crash, the team used all the tools of modern archaeology and crime-lab forensics to sift for remains.

They found a Rolex watch and a mechanical pencil that both matched those carried by Snoddy. But it took a DNA match of the tooth and bone fragments to clinch the identification. (No remains from Schwartz were found.)

"I find it to be miraculous that after that much time they were able to find anything," Cox said. "It's a blessing."

And so last weekend she and Boss found themselves at Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii, in front of that table with all that could be found of Capt. Robert Snoddy. Despite the untruths they had been told, despite the time it had taken, Cox said she was grateful.

"I just have to be glad and thankful it's come to light. Being upset about it will just do

absolutely no good," she said. "I guess I have to say I'm glad we live in this country, where he is not forgotten."

Boss said she was just happy to finally have her only sibling back. A loving sister, she has kept a photo of him next to her bed and wished him good night every evening, and it wasn't much different in Hawaii.

"I just said, 'Hello brother.' "

Cox called it a bittersweet and poignant time, to welcome a father home and now to lay him to rest. But she isn't grieving, because now she has something she never had before.

"I'm not saying goodbye to him, because now I can visit him," she said. "Now I know where he's at forever."

